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The Politics of Starvation

By Arnold S. Kohen and Roberta A. Quance

FAMINE, AS WIDESPREAD and deadly as that destroying Cambodia, threatens at least 400,000 persons still alive in war-torn East Timor. This starvation is no accident; instead, as Britain's *Guardian* recently concluded, the "weight of evidence" shows that starvation is a deliberate policy adopted by the Indonesian government to crush opposition to Jakarta's annexation—accomplished with U.S. arms—of this Connecticut-sized former Portuguese colony in the East Indies. Even before the current famine, church sources had charged that more than 200,000 of East Timor's previous population of 690,000 had died as a result of Indonesia's invasion in December 1975 and subsequent military operations.

By all accounts the present famine is catastrophic. The *Washington Post* cited a report from the only relief specialist from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) allowed in East Timor, who said that the situation is worse than in Biafra during the Nigerian civil war, and potentially more dangerous than in Cambodia today. Indonesia's own foreign minister has endorsed the comparison to Cambodia. Since the Indonesian military has permitted only two outside relief specialists plus two ICRC medical staff members to oversee relief efforts—and the Indonesian army has a long history of obstructing local relief work—East Timor's suffering may have only just begun.

The outcome of Jakarta's four-year campaign backed by the United States seems plain enough. But now, after supplying 90 percent of the arms that the Indonesian military used to launch its invasion, and resupplying it with sophisticated antiguerrilla aircraft (in addition to providing key diplomatic support), the United States has simply swung into another phase of its effort to bury the Timor problem. The State Department is determined to mask the nature and extent of the current crisis, no doubt hoping to forestall debate about the policy. U.S. officials are so eager to protect Jakarta (and their own position) that

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they implicitly discourage more international monitoring, relief, and medical teams from applying to enter East Timor; their eerily optimistic picture of the situation, moreover, helps give the Suharto regime the rationale for rejecting agencies that might apply. The need for significant numbers of independent, on-the-spot observers is crucial. Without such oversight the Indonesian military remains largely free to allocate or withhold relief as it sees fit, according to its political aims. Yet when State Department officials gave their version of events at a December 4 hearing before the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, they all but cheered the Indonesian government's humanitarian concern; they offered arguments and terminology that would have forced George Orwell to expand considerably his famous essay on politics and the English language.

Weeks before the hearing took place, Indonesian officials—in a bizarre contradiction of earlier statements by the foreign minister and despite damning photographic evidence—had busied themselves denying the existence of starvation in East Timor. They were graciously assisted by Washington. Out of deference to the Indonesian generals—rulers of a strategically located, anti-Communist OPEC nation with the fifth largest population in the world—State Department witnesses avoided using the word "famine"; for "starvation" they substituted the less offensive "acute malnutrition." As one senior U.S. official put it privately, "All this talk of starvation drives the Indonesian government up the wall."

Since the December 1975 invasion, the Indonesian military has kept East Timor largely sealed off from independent foreign journalists. The Carter administration has claimed that it therefore knows little about the effects of the invasion of East Timor. But a wide range of reliable sources—including many refugees in Portugal and Australia whom the administration has somehow overlooked—disclose that the Indonesian invasion has dislocated most of the population, prevented the cultivation of crops, and severely upset the traditional economy.

Sources that are close to the Indonesian government privately compare Jakarta's use of airpower with the U.S. carpet-bombing of Indochina; according to these sources the "strategic hamlets" set up by the United States in Vietnam now have their counterparts in the Indonesian-held areas of East Timor (some parts of the territory remain outside Indonesian military control, with up to a few thousand guerrillas reportedly holding out). Nonetheless, in his December testimony, Edward E. Masters, U.S. ambassador to Indonesia, when asked to explain the horrifying condition of tens of thousands of people, offered a list of factors in which the war was virtually a footnote. Among his reasons: "extreme backwardness," "lack of infrastructure," "prevailing poverty," "slash and burn agriculture," "erosion," and "drought." The ambassador did not miss any opportunity to blame Portugal, although he did not specify how the Portuguese, who pulled out of their half of the island four years ago—and never carpet-bombed or defoliated the place—might be responsible for a current famine.

Father Leoneto Vieira do Rego, a 63-year-old Catholic priest who lived in East Timor for twenty-three years, until June 1979, is to date the best available witness to Indonesia's military strategy. (Yet he was not called to testify at the December hearing, which was chaired by Representative Lester Wolff [D-N.Y.]; Wolff, like the State Department, was keen to avoid offending Jakarta.) Father do Rego lived for nearly three years in zones held by East Timor's FRETILIN independence forces. He has explained to the *New York Times* that Jakarta's ruthless campaign of bombing and encirclement forced many to flee further and further into the forbidding interior, and eventually made it impossible for people to cultivate food. As the Indonesian army made inroads into FRETILIN defenses, some of the mountain people, besieged and unprotected, had little choice but to come down from the hills in search of food, clothing, and medical attention; others were forcibly removed from mountain areas by the Indonesian army. All were herded into heavily guarded camps where, church sources charge, as many as one-third have died, chiefly because of a policy of deliberate neglect on the part of the occupation forces.

By State Department admission, there are now 150 such "resettlement centers." Most sources say their total population is at least 300,000. Ambassador Masters referred to these camps as "regroupment areas" where, he maintained, people could most efficiently receive "social services" and be closer to "much better land" than they presently possessed, but he did not explain why they required "regroupment" in the first place. Experts on the region regard the State Department arguments as obfuscations. For Elizabeth Traube, a Harvard-trained anthropologist who lived in East Timor for more than two years, until late 1974, the "regroupment areas" would "clearly represent a break with long-term, traditional settlement patterns, which were adapted to traditional means of subsistence." Traube stresses that today's conditions "are not the natural outcome of East Timorese environment, economy or demography. War is clearly the catalyst."

IF THE NATIONAL PRESS begins to take a close and serious look at the situation (and there are some signs that this is happening), the Carter administration may well have a scandal on its hands. For despite convincing testimony in four hearings during February 1978 before a subcommittee then chaired by Representative Donald M. Fraser (D-Minn.), the Carter administration committed itself to a policy of willful blindness as it stepped up shipments to Jakarta of Rockwell OV-10 "Bronco" planes and other military hardware. The Bronco, ideal for counterinsurgency operations, enabled Jakarta to reach deep into East Timor mountain areas to destroy crops and bomb the population out of the hills.

Although persistent tales of these actions and numerous Indonesian military atrocities have been public for years, the State Department chooses to ignore them. But authoritative sources close to the Indonesian government say that the

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Carter administration has had ample confirmation of these reports. Pointing to America's monitoring and surveillance systems, they hold that Washington has kept a close watch on East Timor. Through these channels alone, then, the State Department has long had information about Jakarta's brutal campaign. It has had full knowledge, in particular, of the Indonesian military's policy of summarily executing most of the FRETILIN soldiers who are either captured or surrender. In some cases even the families of FRETILIN leaders have been shot, children included.

WHILE IGNORING CONtinuing Indonesian brutality, the State Department has, since March 1977, touted a policy of "encouraging" Jakarta to allow the reentry into Timor of the International Red Cross. The ICRC was forced to suspend its operations in December 1975 when the Indonesian military passed along a thinly veiled threat to kill foreigners who did not leave the territory before the invasion. It was April 1979 before the ICRC was even allowed to make a preliminary survey, and October 1979 before it could actually resume operations—with one doctor, one nurse, and one relief specialist to assist the government-controlled Indonesian Red Cross. That it took thirty months to get three ICRC people in speaks eloquently for the Carter administration's "quiet diplomacy." While the administration maintained that it was doing all it could to facilitate the entry of independent relief teams, it knew full well why Jakarta wanted to keep these groups out: The ICRC, charged with enforcing the Geneva conventions, would not have looked favorably on the summary execution of prisoners of war, nor would it have condoned the Indonesian army's nearly total diversion for profit of aid supplies donated from abroad, or the political distribution of what did get through.

From March 1977 through March 1979, Indonesia went all-out to capture areas outside its control where, by State Department admission, most of the population was living. Jakarta's scorched-earth policy, described in detail by Father do Rego, was carried out without the slightest sign of protest from Washington. (U.S. military sales to Indonesia, meanwhile, jumped from $5.8 million in fiscal 1977 to $112 million in fiscal 1978.) Had the ICRC been operating freely in East Timor during this period—let alone since the December 1975 invasion—tens of thousands of deaths from starvation and disease (as well as, perhaps, some executions) could have been prevented. (During the recent bitter fighting in Nicaragua, for example, the ICRC was at least available to provide some sustenance to noncombatants.)

In September 1978, a hand-picked party of journalists and diplomats—including Ambassador Masters—came face to face with the problem on one of Jakarta's rare "conducted tours" through a few East Timorese villages. The Canadian ambassador told reporters that the people he saw in the village of Remexio "were in a deplorable condition. They are starving in many cases; they are desperately ill; they need help in terms of immediate relief—food, clothing, basic medical care." The Australian ambassador, too, found people "in a deplorable condition." One ambassador told David Jenkins of the Hong Kong–based *Far Eastern Economic Review* that the children in one Indonesian-run "transit camp" were so undernourished that "they reminded him of victims of an African famine."

Local church relief workers made the observation that in one district alone—the territory has fourteen—as many as five hundred people a month had died of starvation. "Tuberculosis," Jenkins wrote, "is a major problem, and with so many people sleeping on the damp ground at night, there is danger of widespread pneumonia." A local official warned that, as bad as these conditions were, in other areas conditions were much worse, and aid desperately needed. The Indonesian foreign minister, who had escorted the group, replied that indeed he would welcome foreign humanitarian assistance—so long as the donor nations recognized Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor.

Prior to the ambassadors' visit, the London *Sunday Times* had reported that the trip was designed to "achieve world acceptance" of Indonesia's claim to sovereignty over East Timor. One Australian newspaper had quoted an Indonesian source as saying that the visit was aimed at gathering more support for Jakarta's position in that year's UN debate on the issue. And the Australian press pointed out that while Jakarta was appealing for foreign aid—on its own terms, for the victims of its own aggression—the Indonesian army was using East Timor's coffee to help pay for the upkeep of its troops. In 1978 alone the coffee was valued at $7.5 million, nearly as much as the total U.S. relief aid contribution for East Timor thus far. The Indonesian press has reported that local people are paid less than half of the actual value of the coffee, and church sources charge that the military has in some areas released foreign relief supplies only in exchange for coffee.

The Indonesian government failed in its crude attempt to entice recognition of its claim to East Timor by making that a prerequisite for humanitarian relief assistance. The United Nations continues to reject Indonesia's claim to East Timor, with the Western European nations and Canada following Portugal's lead in withholding recognition. The United States takes a contorted position: It recognizes the Indonesian claim but "does not recognize that a valid act of self-determination has occurred."

In the absence of significant pressure from Indonesia's American and Western European allies, the appalling conditions that came to light in September 1978 were apparently not bad enough to compel Jakarta to admit the ICRC—despite an urgent appeal by seventy-six members of Parliament from nearby Australia. When confronted at the December 4 hearing with evidence of starvation in September 1978, and questioned about why the Indonesian regime had taken so long to permit outside relief agencies to begin their work, Masters simply denied knowing that the situation was all that serious. He reminded the committee that he had been on a "restricted visit"—technically true, although he did not complain at the time—and that "the ambassadors there

The International Red Cross was kept out of East Timor for more than three years.

didn't know how bad it was—the others felt the same way that I did, that the situation wasn't that serious." (At least seven news organizations had said otherwise.)

There has been no deliberate policy of starvation carried out by the Indonesian military, according to Masters. "This is a great disservice to Indonesia," he said, adding that "the treatment of Vietnamese refugees (who have landed on Indonesian islands) shows that this is not true." In fact, one case has absolutely nothing to do with the other; the Vietnamese refugees are not Indonesian military targets. Moreover, Western sources working directly with the Vietnamese refugees in Indonesia charge that Indonesian army men strip many refugees of their possessions and frequently force Vietnamese women into prostitution. As for the original charge, David Watts, in the *Times* of London on December 14, 1979, described the military campaign as "Jakarta's vicious starvation policy." He concluded that "the Indonesian Government must bear a heavy responsibility for not having called in outside help sooner . . . thousands of lives have been needlessly destroyed and far from bringing assistance the Jakarta Government blocked the return of the International Committee of the Red Cross."

THE DETAILS OF THIS delay grow more sordid still. In April 1979 ICRC delegates were finally permitted to go into East Timor to make a preliminary assessment; they found that "tens of thousands of people displaced by military operations were facing starvation unless aid was brought to them quickly, a situation aggravated by the absence of any medical service." Yet the Indonesian government did not move to expedite the entry of the ICRC.

ICRC delegates returned to East Timor in late July 1979 to make a second, more detailed survey. The group visited thirteen villages with a total population of 75,000 and found that 60,000 people were in "an alarming state of malnutrition, among them 20,000 dying of hunger." These 20,000 people were described as being in a "calamitous" condition—they would die whether relief aid reached them or not. And the ICRC went to none of the locations that church officials have long described as the worst in the territory. Nevertheless, it took more than two additional months for significant relief programs to get under way: Many thousands must have starved to death in the interim. The ICRC, when questioned on the long delays, has been careful not to criticize the Indonesian government; the ICRC's situation in East Timor is precarious. As one ICRC official explained, significantly, "We cannot force our way in. We've been available since December 1975, but we needed permission to enter."

Rep. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), who has sharply attacked the State Department position, appeared as the leading witness at the December 4 hearing. Harkin asked that the Carter administration "demand the same accountability from our aid operations in East Timor that we have demanded in the case of Cambodia"; he noted reports of systematic diversion of aid by the Indonesian military and complained that so few outsiders are currently allowed to administer the programs. Ambassador Masters objected specifically to Harkin's call for more outside supervision, on the ground that "there is no reason to send in foreigners to do a monitoring job when Indonesians can do it." Carter administration officials have even tried to suggest that those who call for more outside monitoring are "racist." Aside from the implication that by the same logic, the Carter administration is equally "racist" in Cambodia, this argument ignores what is well known in Indonesia itself: Simply stated, it is the military that runs the show, and it is the military that determines whether aid will be distributed or withheld. At present—and no one is addressing this problem—no aid whatsoever is reaching areas outside of Indonesian control. If the past can serve as a guide, the army will in the long run assist only those who can be induced or forced to accept its military occupation. No one claims that ICRC officials are either any better or more skilled than Indonesians in the same positions, but ICRC officials are not as susceptible to pressure from the Indonesian government, and this is the central issue that the State Department would like to dodge. The military can threaten or even jail local relief workers who challenge its policies, but it cannot coerce the ICRC.

The Carter administration reserves its enthusiasm instead for the New York-based Catholic Relief Services (CRS), which receives nearly 75 percent of its worldwide budget from the U.S. government. CRS is now running the largest operation in East Timor. The *National Catholic Reporter* (NCR) has described how, despite the "competence and integrity of its employees working overseas" (and, it appears, over the protests of many of these same employees), CRS's programs mesh with U.S. foreign policy. In East Timor, the *National Catholic Reporter* says, CRS trucks travel in "guarded military convoys," particularly in "sensitive areas." One source told the paper that the setup makes the CRS aid "part of the apparatus of military occupation. The supplies in military convoys make it look like CRS is an instrument of occupation and pacification." Another source said that "the CRS program should not be described as a church program; CRS is just functioning as a link between the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Indonesian army." Whatever the truth of these statements, CRS operations accord with the Indonesian desire to have as few foreign observers as possible: CRS's program is staffed exclusively by Indonesians and their Timorese collaborators; its American director is present only part time. It is impossible to assess from this distance the effectiveness of this effort, but again, if the past is any indication, the local staff can be doing very little about military corruption or strong-arm tactics.

The real question remains: Why is the ICRC not being permitted to work freely in all parts of East Timor? Why are the "sensitive areas" apparently the exclusive domain of CRS? ICRC's relief and medical operations—and even Masters has acknowledged the overwhelming medical needs—presently cover only 13 of 150 targeted villages, with CRS assigned the remainder. Besides the dis-

Between 1977 and 1978, U.S. military sales to Indonesia rose almost 2000 percent.

turbing question of whether a single ICRC relief specialist is able to check aid distribution in 13 villages with 75,000 people, no one has adequately explained this odd imbalance. And while CRS programs may go on indefinitely, ICRC operations are slated to end by April 1 unless Jakarta grants a renewal.

Four-fifths of the villagers were starving; 20,000 would die even if aid came through.

Even, however, if the ICRC and other reputable groups gained full access to the territory, the CRS effort worked, and the East Timorese began to recover their health, hundreds of thousands of people would remain in the regroupment areas. One witness at the December 4 hearing, Bruce Cameron of Americans for Democratic Action, cited a report on East Timor prepared in late 1979 by the U.S. embassy in Jakarta, which stated matter-of-factly that "the people are now in these villages and the GOI [Government of Indonesia] plans for them to remain there." A prestigious Australian aid council underlines the desperate need for relief, but points out that "aid to people in these camps without attempting to demand the right of the people there to return to their land simply condemns the East Timorese to continued dependence on outside supplies." Such a project, in the words of the council, is "clearly aid to the Indonesian military strategy." Father do Rego, who lived in the camps himself, worries that if the surviving people do not return to their homes, there will be little hope of restoring East Timor's economy and culture.

THUS THE FULL TRAGEDY emerges. What the Carter administration is trying to obscure is the destruction of a people and their way of life. Representative Harkin spoke for many observers when he stated categorically that the questions of relief assistance and regroupment cannot be discussed apart from the issues of Indonesian aggression and the violation of the right of the East Timorese people to self-determination.

Given Representative Wolff's reluctance at the hearing to "becloud humanitarian concerns" with political problems, one hardly expects him to raise these questions during a January visit with other congressmen. A similar group from the Wolff subcommittee went to East Timor in April 1977, and proved both ineffectual and ridiculous. One member, Representative William Goodling (R-Pa.), returned home noisily parroting Indonesian propaganda and offering the penetrating insight than an enormous capital investment would be required to build suitable facilities in East Timor for American tourists (Goodling was scheduled to return on the January mission). Wolff, who ignored East Timor for at least two years, until the major media began to show an interest, had the audacity to claim at the December 4 hearing that "the initial relief efforts now being carried out by Catholic Relief Service were begun" in response to the recommendations of the April 1977 group. In mid-December, the Australian Broadcasting Commission reported that the Indonesian military was launching a new offensive, quite possibly in preparation for the Wolff visit—and that at the same time the Indonesian government had ordered journalists off a plane bound for East Timor.

But, in the end, public embarrassment may well force the United States—and Jakarta itself—to reverse its position. In a Christmas Eve editorial, for example, the *New York Times* condemned the Carter administration's stance on East Timor, and an earlier editorial in the *Christian Science Monitor* pointed to Indonesia's denial of Timorese self-determination and to the need for outside observers on the island. American TV networks, along with London's BBC, have shown interest in the issue and may soon be pressing to enter the territory.

U.S. officials try to portray themselves as hostages of Indonesian policy: If too much is said about East Timor, they claim, Jakarta may bar or severely restrict future relief missions. Wolff echoes this line. As one Capitol Hill source said privately, "They [the State Department and Lester Wolff] make you feel like a Nazi if you go beyond the issues as they define them." What is left out of the State Department's argument, however, is the degree to which Indonesia is sensitive to international opinion, particularly that of the West. In October 1977, only days after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Amnesty International released a major report on political imprisonment in Indonesia. It is no coincidence that scarcely more than two months later, 10,000 political detainees who had been held for more than twelve years without trial were released; another 20,000 political prisoners have been let out of jail since then. Although the problem of political prisoners is by no means solved, the large-scale releases since late 1977 are a giant step forward. Few qualified observers doubt that it was international pressure that compelled Jakarta to free 30,000 prisoners.

The same kind of pressure can be applied on behalf of East Timor, perhaps with even more force given the parallels to Cambodia. It is at least conceivable that Jakarta, ever sensitive to Western opinion, may eventually want to cut its losses and withdraw. Continued U.S. support for the Suharto regime's barbarism in East Timor is merely another version of what Frances FitzGerald once called "giving the Shah everything he wants." We now know where that leads.

Ironically, U.S. support for Suharto's invasion of East Timor can be traced back to Henry Kissinger. The then secretary of state was in Jakarta the day before Indonesian forces launched their merciless assault; before he left Kissinger said he "understood" Indonesia's position. At no time did this renowned practitioner of "shuttle diplomacy" indicate that he was ready to help negotiate peace, although high-level Portuguese sources contend that he had had several opportunities to dissuade the Indonesian generals. As columnist Jack Anderson recently reported (and as diplomatic circles knew at the time), the Suharto regime was worried about adverse international—and especially American—reaction to a full-scale invasion. It is more than possible that had Kissinger been willing to make any effort at all, the catastrophe in East Timor might have been averted. Now that a holocaust has brought this area to the attention of the world, East Timor may properly be placed with Kissinger's other trophies, alongside Cambodia, Bangladesh, Kurdistan, Vietnam, Laos, and Chile. ❑